

Heritage Tourism Corner
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By Jarrod McCartney

One of the more discouraging things about small town life is that the rumor mill is prone to churn and churn. Instead of getting bogged down with discouragement, however, it is often more useful to just talk about concerns and see where we all have common ground. With that in mind, I thought it might be useful to dispel some myths connected to Heritage Tourism and my own perspective about historic preservation. Let's start with the brick streets: I don't want to keep the brick streets but think we need something to replace them that is both practical and retains the look and feel of a historic downtown. From a tourism standpoint, losing that look and feel would be losing a huge part of our appeal and identity. Personally, I would love a bypass so that we can make downtown a nice place to walk, talk, and shop but realize that this probably not going to happen.

Next, contrary to popular belief, The Cather Foundation pays taxes. You can go to the County Assessor's website and see for yourself: webster.assessor.gisworkshop.com. You might notice that the Moon Block is valued at nearly \$400,000 (for scale the Potter Block is valued at around \$12K—the Moon Block is going to make everything else more valuable in the long run). I'm guessing you wouldn't want to swap property tax bills unless maybe you have a lot of farmland. If you thought Cather didn't pay taxes you were always wrong, but the property tax revenue demonstrates value that Cather adds to the community in ways that are clear and obvious, not artsy-fartsy or based on fanciful projections. Where much of the confusion lies with Cather and taxes is the fact that nonprofits generally do not pay property taxes if their property is being used solely for educational or charitable purposes. The Moon Block is actually owned by an LLC that is managed by the Willa Cather Foundation so WCF has to pay taxes on that property. The Cather Foundation also pays property taxes on the Cather Second Home since it is a lodging facility. Additionally, Cather owns a ½ section of farmland in rural Webster County that it pays taxes on. The matter of the fact is, there are probably ways for the Cather Foundation to actually lessen its tax burden that it simply doesn't take advantage of, to the benefit of Webster County. Then, of course, there is the fact that Cather generates a great deal of sales and lodging tax. There's a multiplier effect here too in that Cather visitors shop and stay elsewhere in the community and those places generally charge lodging and/or sales tax.

I am aware that there are other things in the community to promote besides Cather. I work in the building and it's our most important tourism asset so I am going to continue to aggressively promote it and point out Heritage Tourism's connection to it. That said, I want other things for Red Cloud and don't think we can thrive on Cather alone. I would love to get a committee together to figure out how we make something happen with our baseball history and to do more to promote hunting, recreation, and sports (I miss the hum of and traffic coming from the Speed Bowl for instance). The fact of the matter though, is that the Cather Foundation has a 60 year head start on building resources and networks and has unique, international appeal. Bringing these other areas up to speed will not happen overnight and we have to grapple with the reality that other communities have many of the same things. We can take solace, however, in knowing that the forthcoming hotel and the taxes it and the Cather Foundation generate will be able to be utilized in helping us broaden what we can promote. And there's a snowball effect too: The Cather Center led to the belief that we could do TVCDC and is the reason that there is a market for the hotel project—and the hotel project is what is necessary to keep tourist dollars in town and spending money at places other than Cather. TVCDC, the businesses that will serve the hotel guests,

and having things to do outdoors will make Red Cloud a more attractive place for young families to move to. Families like the Benges who now own and operate Hometown Market.

I would also like to discourage people from settling into their own silos of thought and not interacting with other people who think differently than they do. I am often guilty of that myself as I get busy with work and projects. But the danger of that is that we don't know what other people are thinking and we imagine what they think about an issue instead of just talking to them about it. For instance, though I imagine folks believe I am a staunch historic preservationist who's against tearing anything down, the truth is I support sensible preservation that helps our community keep its identity intact and is attractive to tourists whose money we need so that we don't endlessly recycle our own dollars, many of which already seep out of the community. I, however, live here and my daughter goes to school here. So I am personally ecstatic about the greenhouse and am eager to see what the new parking lot by the school will look like. I think it already looks way better. I'm still in awe at how nice the track looks. I believe having modern, up to date facilities for young families is just as crucial to our long term survival as a community as the whole heritage tourism endeavor. There are some things that are simply more important than my job and having a school that people are proud of is one of them. I also think national politics are largely irrelevant to what we can accomplish locally and, inasmuch as possible, we should worry about our own interests and not those of DC or Lincoln.

I would encourage everyone to stop seeing things as oppositional and instead see how it can all be interrelated or how we can best leverage our assets to make Red Cloud as great as it can be. We might need to lean on the asset we're known for the most in order to create resources for and interest in everything else. Not to sound like a crass capitalist, but you can profit off of Cather even if you've never read a single word of her writing. The key is to work together so that a rising tide can lift all boats. Not to sound like a new age hippie, but we are all stronger when we work with and try to understand one another. And I am eager for new people to participate in current organizations or start new projects of their own. I think this creates fresh thinking and distributes workload so that we don't get burned out--- and don't be afraid to offer praise alongside or instead of complaints. It will encourage better work. I encourage you to contact me if there are things you want to help with or ideas you'd like to explore. I will warn you now, however, that there probably isn't a grant for it, and even if there is a grant for it, you'll have to do a lot of work and raise some money on your own. I guarantee it won't be easy, but I know the payoff will be worth it.